LOVE'S EXTRAVAGANT DEMAND

September 16, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Colossians 3:12-17
Matthew 18:21-35

"Forgive as freely as the Lord has forgiven you."
-Colossians 3:13b (J.B. Phillips)

"Forgive as freely as the Lord has forgiven you..." Robert Coles, Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard, in his fine book, Harvard Diary, remembers a seminar conducted by Anna Freud. The case study was a woman who had a life-long habit of making everyone around her very unhappy. She had driven her husband and son crazy, spent her own unhappy life going from therapist to therapist, kept her own family in a constant state of turmoil and conflict.

Dr. Freud asked at the end of the presentation: "What would we want for this old woman? I don't mean psychoanalysis... this poor old lady doesn't need us at all. She's had her fill of us. She's been visiting one or another of us for years, for decades... what she needs is forgiveness. She needs to make peace with her own soul. There must be a god somewhere to help her, to hear her, to heal her. We certainly aren't the ones who will be of assistance to her."

Roberts Coles reflects: "When will some of us learn that... on our knees, in prayer, we might at last find God's forgiving smile." [Harvard Diary]

The real world, the frightening tough world of 1990, seems to render the idea of forgiveness obsolete, irrelevant, childish.

Who will ever forget July 1, 1988 when we heard that a guided missile from a United State Navy ship, patrolling in the Persian Gulf, had hit an Iranian airplane. It turned out to be an airliner filled with civilians. The missile was efficient. The airliner crashed into the ocean. Two hundred ninety Iranian civilians - women, men, little children, old people, young people - died. No one ever apologized for that. We said we regretted the loss of innocent life, but essentially blamed the Iranians and then gave a few medals to Navy personnel on board the ship. Six months later a Pan American flight was blown out of the sky over Scotland and 259 American civilians died.

Revenge, retaliation - the oldest, most traditional human response to injustice and personal offense - is grim business. It doesn't work. It

never has and never will. Two wrongs don't make a right. Your enemy will remain your enemy, more bitterly and defiantly so, if you exact the last bitter drop of retribution. This is not news. Everybody knows it. If you can read history, you know that an eye for an eye doesn't do a thing except leave two people blind. It doesn't work between nations. In fact, it creates long-term suffering and historic evil which mounts and builds in pressure until it erupts in ghastly violence. We know now that the harsh treatment of Germany in the Treaty of Versailles, exacted by the allies in the name of justice, was what made the Second World War inevitable. It doesn't work within societies. What after all was satsafied when Charles Walker died of a lethal injection last week? Nobody seriously argues that capital punishment will deter murderers. We know that argument isn't valid. We did it to make ourselves feel better, to express something deep inside us, something as old as our history.

It is that something -- that something that refuses to apologize when we kill civilians, that something that wants corporately to kill in retaliation for killing. It is that self-destructive impulse in us which always masquerades as justice and strength and honor; it is just that which Jesus Christ came to confront and convert and challenge.

Every week we pray together. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Every week, every day, we pray revolutionary words Jesus taught his disciples to pray, words which join together the basic good news of the Gospel with a behavioral imperative so drastic that we don't, for a moment, seriously consider actually living like it.

It is a complicated, difficult matter at every level - this business of forgiveness. It is complicated because retaliation seems so fair.

The notion of retribution as justice is one of the oldest human ideas of all. An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth. A life for a life. It's in the Code of Hammurabi. It's in the Old Testament. It is elegantly simple. It is the ethical inversion of the Golden Rule: do unto others as you would have them do to you: i.e. "do to others as they have done to you." It feels right. It is intellectually and emotionally satisfying. And it doesn't work - if your goal is something other than a perpetuation of the conflict which produced the first offense.

Peter, Jesus' closest and strongest friend, expresses it. Peter, the one we understand best because he sounds so like us, embarrasses us, evokes smiles of recognition. He's the one who wants his religion without discipline, wants Jesus to be the son of God without the cross; wants, this morning, to see if he can't exact a little realism from Jesus, a little compromise, a little loosening of these incessant, impossible ethical demands of his, wants Jesus to be a little moderate; wants, most of all, just like us, to hold on to the old, tried and true way of doing things.

Jesus has been talking about what to do if another person commits an offense against you - a fairly common occasion in the human enterprise, after all. Peter asks a good question: "How many times should I forgive someone who sins against me?" The religious-legal system suggested just retribution for personal offense. The offender makes restitution, pays back what he stole, restores the balance of justice. Rabbinic Judaism moderated that by teaching that a righteous person will forgive the offender three times. On the fourth offense, the old system activates, and

you can let the offender have it. So Peter is actually being quite magnanimous. "The tradition says forgive three times. How about we settle on seven: that's twice as many as our Rabbi's recommend, with an extra thrown in for good measure." Seven times. If the offender persists, you're free to let him have it on number eight.

Peter misses the point. If you're counting, Jesus says, you haven't heard me. Seven times seventy is a euphemism. It means "without limits." If you're counting, you're waiting, probably eagerly, for the eighth offense. In fact, if you're waiting for number eight, your sense of justice with its basis in retaliation actually has a longer time to anticipate, to ferment, to get up a good head of self-righteous, indignant steam. When number eight happens, it's really going to be something.

Peter missed the point. The old way doesn't work if the purpose of this dynamic is reconciliation, redemption, hope. For new life to happen, someone has to think in an altogether new way.

"Forgive without counting," says Jesus. If there are limits, then we are not really talking about forgiving, merely delaying retaliation.

And then he told a story, vivid, funny in a morbid way, ultimately disturbing. A servant owed his King 10,000 talents. That's ten million dollars. It's an enormous debt, an unpayable debt. He cannot repay what he owes. The King prepares to exercise the justice available to him: he plans to sell the man and his family as slaves and to recoup a small portion of his loss. The servant pleads for mercy. The King feels pity and forgives the debt. Great story. Everybody should live happily ever after. But then, this newly liberated servant who now has his whole future given back to him, this man on his way out, bumps into a fellow servant who owes him the equivalent of twenty dollars, grabs him by the throat, demands repayment. The debtor, as our man had done before the King, falls on his knees, begs for a little patience. His debt is payable, but it will take a while. Instead of forgiving the debt, instead even of agreeing to a time payment plan, our man calls the police and has his debtor thrown in jail. Justice is done.

The King, however, hears about it, becomes angry, summons him, reverses his decision. This time he doesn't sell the man into slavery, but puts him in jail until he pays the debt, which means forever.

The man missed the meaning of forgiveness: missed his own forgiveness and more: missed his whole life actually because of his stubborn unwillingness to forgive his debtor. There is more at stake here than a debt. This man is in jail forever, not because he got in debt, committed murder, but because he neglected to forgive.

There are, it seems, to me, several mistakes that we are inclined to make when it comes to this topic. The first is to conclude that the Gospel is easy: that it releases individuals from accountability for their behavior: no punishment - no responsibility. The second mistake is to conclude that we are guilty of no gross evil so all this talk about guilt, remorse and forgiveness doesn't apply to us. And the third is the opposite of the second, namely that we are so without value, goodness and worth and have actually done so much that is wrong, that forgiveness is not for us.

Christianity is not easy. There is in Christianity a morality which requires responsibility. For the same reason we value the integrity, liberty and rights of the individual, we insist that individuals are responsible for their behavior. Garrison Keillor wrote an essay, "The Current Crisis in Remorse " from the point of view of the Director of the Remorse Department in a modern American city. "We in remorse are a radical minority within the social work community. We believe that not every wrong in our society is the result of complex factors such as poor early learning environment and resultant dissocialized communication. Some wrong is the result of badness. We believe some people act like jerks." [We Are Still Married, p. 22]

And Karl Menninger who wrote a blistering indictment of the retaliation/revenge idea which is the heart of our penal system in "The Crime of Punishment," also wrote an elegant book, Whatever Became of Sin, in which he argued against the tendency to excuse individuals from responsibility for behavior. When you reject retaliation as a way to establish justice, you do not have to release persons from accountability for behavior. To be opposed to capital punishment on the grounds that it represents a wrong notion of justice and ultimately demeans every one of us, is not to condone murder or to suggest that people who commit serious crimes should be free to live among us. To forgive someone for abusive, hurtful behavior does not at all mean to return to the relationship merely to submit again to the abuse.

Nor does the parable mean that forgiveness is cheap and therefore trivial. Forgiveness is very costly business. C. S. Lewis quipped once that "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive... and then, to mention the subject at all is to be greeted with howls of anger." [Mere Christianity, p. 89]

What this parable teaches is that individuals are accountable, that forgiveness is very costly business and that we experience forgiveness, not as a theological or interpersonal abstraction, but we experience our own forgiveness in the very act of forgiving others. There is no other way, apparently, said Jesus. We experience forgiveness as we forgive others.

Paul Tillich, one of the most influential theologians in our century, wrote elegant and important books, but preached very simply. In a memorable sermon at Harvard he talked about the uniqueness of Jesus' teaching about forgiveness. Religion, Tillich taught, often makes the mistake of assuming that it must convict the sinner before it announces God's forgiveness: must, that is to say, create sufficient guilt to produce remorse to come up with a confession in order to activate forgiveness. It is, Tillich says, simply a religious variation on the old theme of making sure people get what they deserve, in this instance, a full measure of bad feelings about themselves. Much organized religion eagerly accepts the responsibility for creating the pre-condition for forgiveness, namely guilt. The preacher is the prosecutor, judge and jury. And so religion, too frequently in the literature of our culture, is simply the flip side of a guilty conscience.

But if you read the dynamic carefully, said Tillich, you notice that forgiveness comes first. It's not that sinners are lovely that causes Jesus to love them. He loves and accepts them because that's how God's

love is. And then, as they are loved and accepted they become aware of their sin and know about forgiveness and new life starts to happen.

Forgiveness creates repentance, he taught, not vice versa. Remember all the times Jesus forgives the sins of people who don't ask him to aren't particularly aware that they have sins to be forgiven. The first thing he says to the paralytic who is brought to him is "your sins are forgiven."

"Nothing greater," wrote Tillich, "can happen to a human being than that he is forgiven. When you know yourself forgiven, the fire of love begins to burn." [The New Being, p. 7,8]

My guess is that there are two things true about each one of us. The first is that somewhere deep inside us we know we need to be forgiven by someone else, by ourselves, by God. And the second thing is that each of us needs to forgive - needs to release the hold we have on some offense, some wrong done, some betrayal - needs to free the debtor and in the process free ourselves.

The first is theological; the second is relational and interpersonal. We have mixed feelings about the Prayer of Confession as a regular part of worship. Sometimes we don't like it. Sometimes we feel like we're being accused unjustly. We're not aware of having gone along with warfare, prejudices or greed. We haven't knowingly hated or hurt anyone this week. The older confessional language that "there is no health in us" sounds like the kind of repressive religion we fled long ago. And yet the more one thinks about it, if you will, knows about God... the more one is aware of oneself, one's humanness, the more one is aware of the need for something like acceptance, affirmation, grace, forgiveness. It isn't that knowing God produces guilt, but it does produce a sense of our finiteness, limits, and the occasional messes we make. It also, sometimes, makes us a little defensive.

There is a wonderful "Peanuts" cartoon that penetrates our defenses. "You know what the whole trouble with you is, Charlie Brown?" Lucy asks. Charlie Brown responds, "No, and I don't want to know. Leave me alone!" He walks away. And Lucy yells after him, "The whole trouble is that you won't listen to what the whole trouble with you is."

My guess is that not one of us is perfect. That not one of us is without untruth, betrayal, cruelty and that there are things we have done - or left undone known only to ourselves - that we cannot and will not confess to another. There are betrayals which we need to take to God alone; because if we confessed them to the one we betrayed, it might relieve us of a burden, by placing an unbearable burden on the innocent other. We don't have to. The good news is that forgiveness is there for us. A God who is loving enough to take us seriously, to hold us accountable, to understand our feelings of guilt, is there for us, always forgiving, always loving. The good news is that there is a God who wants to heal and restore us to normal wonderfully human relationships by forgiving us and in that act, empowering us to forgive ourselves.

William Muehl writes bluntly and eloquently... "No one is truly forgiven until he is treated as forgiven, until he is once again subjected to the exploitations and burdens of normal human relationships, as well as their privileges. The moment in which his wife tosses the guilty husband

the dish towel and says, "All right, Buster, it's your turn to dry," that is when the penitent husband knows that he is once again a member and a victim in good standing within the human family." [All The Damned Angels, p. 30]

And my humble estimate is that for every one of us there are people to be forgiven. To put it another way, there are individuals and incidents in which we were hurt, insulted, humiliated, slighted, betrayed, the harboring of which has us in a kind of bondage. The extent to which we nurture resentment, cling to past offenses, let our anger simmer and boil is the extent to which we are not free, not in love, but in a hellish bondage to the past. It's in every heart: a teacher who treated you unfairly, a bully whose humiliating taunts you can still hear across the years, an unloving neglecting parent, an abusive parent, a professor, the supervisor who drove you out of your job, the boss who fired you, a significant other who betrayed you, and children who take you for granted, the spouse who abuses your love, and exploits your kindness!

There aren't many of us who can't find ourselves somewhere in a list like that.

There aren't any of us who don't need to be free of that.

You see, the one who is offended has to do the forgiving. The one who has been wronged has to pay the price for forgiveness to happen. No amount of apologizing, no amount of guilt or remorse can do it. Only the offended can forgive. Only the one who was wronged can free the offender and in the process free himself/herself from the prison of sin and guilt.

It is not easy. It is not easy because we cannot and do not forget. Forgiving does not mean forgetting. It means the determination that what was done and what will never be forgotten in the heart of the offended will no longer imprison me. In the case of one we love, the wrong done will no longer separate us. Forgiveness means that the will to live in freedom and love is stronger than the power of sin.

When it happens, said the professor, it transforms everything.

The Good News of the Gospel is that in Jesus Christ it has happened. We are forgiven, accepted, loved unconditionally by the one who created us; the very one who taught us to experience that forgiveness, our forgiveness, by forgiving: to experience God's love by loving: to know God's gracious acceptance, by accepting.

"Forgive us our debts," he prayed, "as we forgive our debtors."

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Merciful and loving God, we pray weekly our prayers of confession. And we know that we have no secrets; that you know the recesses of our hearts and minds and lives. We thank you for accepting us as we are, for forgiving us even before we ask. And we do now ask you for the strength and courage and grace to forgive those who have offended us: to free our debtors, and ourselves, for new life in your love; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.